



A Pride and Prejudice Variation Novella

*As
Fate
Would
Have It*

Kimberly McBride



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by

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1. *Self-Reproach*

"Sir, I think you must have dropped this," a soft, familiar voice spoke to him after he had stepped from his carriage. He could barely hear it over the cacophony of the busy London street, but he recognized it immediately. The sound of her melodic, gentle voice had been echoed in his head over the past weeks, never leaving him alone.

Elizabeth.

He stood paralyzed, and before he could think of what to say or do, he felt a brush against his arm and a small, gloved hand pressed an envelope into his hand.

The lady quickly stepped away, and she paused and looked back only as she started to round the corner. Struggling to comprehend reality from what was surely an apparition before him, he just stood and looked at her. She was as beautiful as ever, her eyes twinkling with laughter, and her teeth glistening as she smiled. Her rich, dark eyes held his from a distance, both of their bodies still in time. How long? He could not say but had it been a lifetime he still would have

wanted more time to take in her loveliness.

Finally, the lady broke the spell with a slight nod of her head, and she disappeared around the corner. By the time he had recovered his wits enough to follow her, she was long out of sight.



Now standing in his library, he was full of conflicting emotion as he stared at the envelope in his hand, on which his name was written in an elegant flowing script. The faint scent of lavender, *her* scent, carried up to him. His brain flooded with images of Elizabeth; his last sight of her as he had given his letter to her in the park at Rosings.

He turned the envelope in his hands over again and again, afraid to open it. He was gripped with apprehension that the contents would destroy the comfort that had suffused over him when she had smiled. He needed to grasp at anything that even remotely relieved the pain and misery that had consumed him since her rejection.

After leaving Kent, Mr. Darcy had isolated

himself in his London home, indulging his grief and anger. Long nights had been spent drowning his raw emotions with liquor. He had shouted curses in his fits of anger and shattered crystal against the hearth, the shards scattering in all directions from the violent force of his throw. He had pounded his fists until they were bruised and throbbing so that he would feel anything other than the constrictions of his broken heart. Slowly his dreadful bitterness had begun to give way as he gave reason to the justice of her words, but regret and despair remained his steadfast companions.

She had turned and smiled at him, which surely indicated the letter was positive and should be opened. Mr. Darcy stared at his name written in her embellished script while his mind warred with his hands.

He paced in his library, the room that at one time had been his haven and refuge, but more recently had become his private hell. The long red flames of the fire raging in the grate had been his demons in pursuit. But now, by holding her unopened letter, the room became his purgatory, with mere smoldering embers not capable of producing light or heat,

just uncertainty. What if the letter contained further thrashing from her arsenal of words? Words fired with precise accuracy to deliver the most damage?

He shook his hanging head. Elizabeth was not cruel. She had retaliated because he had wounded her, she had initially shown restraint, but he had provoked her. If her words were painful, it was because of their truth; he could not hold that against her.

Could the letter be a request for help, something which only he could assist her? He fancied a Herculean task that he would complete admirably. He would slay the dragon and thereby earn her love. Wasn't that how it happened in tales? But real life would never be that simple. Indeed, he was his own worst enemy, the beast to be tamed.

The final convincing thought that forced his action was that it was Elizabeth's will that he read her words. She wanted him to, and he would honor her wishes above all else. Thus, he broke the seal and began to read while holding his breath.

Mr. Darcy,

I thank you in advance for your acceptance of this letter and your attention to its content. I

know I show audacity to affront propriety in such a way and customarily I would not, but in this case, I cannot conform. My conscience will not allow it. There are times when confronted with self-realization that instincts must overrule, and I feel this is such a time. Your letter has opened my eyes to how despicably I have acted. I, who have prided myself on my discernment and valued my rational abilities, have fallen victim to that which I have ridiculed in others. How humiliating is this discovery and yet, how just a humiliation.

You must know that I do not doubt the truthfulness of what you have imparted to me regarding Mr. Wickham. There is no need to validate that which, once I opened my eyes, was all too readily apparent. I am honored you trust me with such a personal disclosure. I shall hold your secret securely and am sorry for the painful reflection required to write of such events. I can now see the evil nature of Mr. Wickham's behavior that had once eluded me. How could I have allowed myself to be taken in by his charm? I have asked myself this question repeatedly and can only say in honesty that I have been guilty of vanity and blindness.

With regard to my sister and Mr. Bingley, I

must allow you your own supposition. My friend Mrs. Collins had previously expressed uncertainty about my sister's affections, but I who know Jane so well and love her so dearly, forget that others do not see in her expression all that I see. The irony of masked regard is not lost upon me. How easy it is to misunderstand another's intentions. There is no excuse for the harshness of my words to you. Words that I regret were based on falsehood and misapprehension. For the whole of my actions and words, I am genuinely sorry. I regret that I will never know the gentleman that you really are. Lastly, while I have no right to ask, I sincerely hope that someday you will find a way to forgive me. As once wished to me, I truly wish God's greatest blessings on you.

E.B.

There, in those moments of quiet solitude, Fitzwilliam Darcy found that which had been eluding him. Holding her letter in his hand, he felt the torment of the past weeks begin to slip away slowly. It was replaced by the dawning of understanding: understanding of her, of him and all that had transpired between them.

She had stated she did not know the real him. How could she? In addition to never

having corrected Wickham's falsehoods, he had also rarely let down his own façade of cold indifference. He had used it so effectively in recent years as protection from the many who sought to take advantage of his wealth and position. Her reproofs had allowed him to see himself as she saw him, and he had realized he was not the man he wanted to be. A lifetime of instruction on propriety and how to be a gentleman had not taught him that which he now knew was essential. Elizabeth, with her integrity, sense and indomitable spirit, had shown him. Her letter in his hand was his hope, and God helps him, Elizabeth - his salvation.

1. Faults of Understanding

"Cousin Lizzy! You are back!"

"Yes, dear Sarah! I am back," Elizabeth answered, pulling her seven-year-old cousin into a tight hug. "Now tell me all about your day. Have you had fun with Cousin Jane?"

They sat companionably side by side on the sofa. Sarah's legs stuck straight out as they were too short to bend over the edge, and Elizabeth watched her rub the toes of her dainty pale shoes together excitedly as she began to talk.

"Cousin Jane had visitors! Mr. Blingly--"

"Mr. Bingley?" Elizabeth cried out with astonishment.

"Yes, that is correct. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy," Sarah said, the latter name drawn out and dreamily.

"Mr. Darcy?" Lizzy stuttered as she struggled to regain her composure. She was thankful to be sitting and doubly grateful her young cousin would think nothing of her sudden uneasiness. Her mind was racing through a myriad of thoughts and questions. Why had he come? Was it because of her

letter? What had Mr. Darcy thought of her letter? What did he think of her?

"The gentlemen are very polite," Sarah continued, drawing Elizabeth's attention back to her.

"Yes, they are," the older woman nodded. "Did they stay long?" Her curiosity was getting the best of her, and she knew that with very little prodding her precocious little cousin would tell her all.

"I think so, long enough for Mr. Darcy to read me all of my storybook."

"He read to you? Mr. Darcy read to you?" Elizabeth was astounded.

"Oh, yes." The girl wriggled, unable to contain her excitement. "Cousin Jane and Mr. Bingley were busy talking, and Mr. Darcy looked lonely. I remembered what Mama taught me about entertaining our guests, so I asked him if he wanted to hear a story."

Elizabeth was too flabbergasted to speak but nodded her head encouragingly.

"We sat together, and he read all the stories, not just the first one, and he did the voices too. He sounded quite amusing for the girl voices, and his monster voice was scary, but I

was not frightened because I know it was just pretended," Sarah said proudly. "I liked his knight voice the best, and I told him that."

"You did?"

"Umhmm. I also told him that out of all of the gentlemen visitors you and Cousin Jane have, I think he is the most handsome," Sarah smiled and had that dreamy look in her eyes again.

"What did he say?" Elizabeth questioned, all the while thinking she could not be any more astonished.

"He said to be sure to tell you that, and he smiled. He is even more handsome when he smiles. His cheeks smile here and here." Sarah's small fingers touched her older cousin's cheeks in a demonstration.

Elizabeth laughed both at his implication and Sarah's gesture. "Those are called dimples."

"Dimples? What a funny word. Do you not think him ever so handsome and nice, Cousin Lizzy?"

"Yes, I do, Sarah," Elizabeth answered honestly, once again pleased to be conversing with a child and could therefore put aside all

pretenses.

Mr. Darcy certainly was handsome, and while she probably would not have chosen the word nice to describe him, his behavior toward her young cousin merited her concession.

"And then we talked," Sarah continued excitedly.

"What did you talk about?" Elizabeth asked, having a hard time even beginning to guess what quiet and reserved Mr. Darcy would talk about with a seven-year-old girl whose acquaintance he had just made.

"We talked about what we do when you and Cousin Jane visit. I told him how we twirl and run in the park and play tag and go on treasure hunts and feed the animals. I told him maybe he could do those things with us some time because it is so much fun."

"Indeed?"

Sarah nodded, her eyes wide. "He said he would like that very much. He wanted to know my favorite color and yours. His is blue. He asked my favorite flower, and I told him that you and I like wildflowers because they are carefree and can wander where they will

and are for everyone to admire."

Elizabeth remembered the time she had told little Sarah that very thing and smiled.

"He promised to make me a daisy chain crown when I told him how much we like to put flowers in our hair. He said he used to make them for his sister, but she is nearly grown now, so he will make one for me. Maybe tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Elizabeth asked a bit anxious.

"Indeed. He promised, and Papa says a gentleman always keeps his promises. Mr. Darcy is a gentleman, is he not, Cousin Lizzy?"

"Yes, Sarah. Mr. Darcy is a gentleman," Elizabeth answered reassuringly, to herself as well as to her devoted cousin. She hugged the little girl close as new emotion roiled inside her. Never would she have guessed Mr. Darcy, who so effortlessly offended nearly the whole town of Meryton in a matter of one week, could so easily charm her bright and insightful little cousin in an hour.

"I told him I thought you would be home soon and that he should wait for you," Sarah spoke again. "But then he got sad all of a sudden and told me he had said some unkind

things to you, things he was very sorry for, and he was afraid you would not want to see him again. That is not true, is it, Cousin Lizzy?" she questioned, notably worried.

"No, dear. We had a little disagreement, and I am just as much at fault. I would like to see him again," Elizabeth answered quietly.

"I knew you would!" Sarah called out triumphantly. "I told him how you always say that God wants us to forgive each other, and he smiled."

Elizabeth wondered how children possessed the talent to strip away the complexities of life that adults were invariably contrived and exposed the truth so simply.

"I think you are an exemplary hostess, Miss Sarah Gardiner! Your mother will be proud of you. Let us go find her to see if she needs our assistance," Elizabeth exclaimed into the beaming face of her young cousin while attempting to hide the tumult of her burgeoning mind behind her own smile.



Elizabeth and Jane had managed only a

brief time of privacy amidst the chaos of the Gardiner family's life to discuss the gentlemen's visit, but Jane shared enough for Elizabeth to feel more comfortable. Mr. Bingley had explained he had only learned of Jane's presence in town that very morning and his easy, unassuming manners had reassured Jane of his sincerity. The change in Jane's demeanor was readily apparent, and Elizabeth was comforted by Jane's unmistakable joy. Her own feelings, however, remained ambiguous.

She slid open the window, seeking relief from the oppressive atmosphere that had surrounded her these past weeks. The clatter and din of the ever-busy London streets mirrored the chaos of her mind. She had never felt as unsure of herself as she did now. She yearned for Longbourn and the familiar paths of her youth.

Alone in the room, Elizabeth finally had the opportunity to contemplate the extraordinary and unexpected events of the day. She was sure Mr. Darcy was responsible for Mr. Bingley's enlightenment, and such an admission would not have come from the unfeeling, arrogant man she had declared him to be. Elizabeth's heart warmed at the thought

of Jane's happiness, and she was grateful to Mr. Darcy for his involvement in restoring her sister's smile.

One by one, her grievances regarding his character were falling away, and she could not ignore the favorable impression he had made on Sarah. That he had willingly sought the company of the family he had openly disdained only weeks ago puzzled her. Was Mr. Darcy here to see her as well, or was he only accompanying his friend? His comments to her cousin led her to believe he was interested in continuing their acquaintance, but could he possibly have forgiven all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him? Did he truly not think ill of her? Had her letter of apology convinced him of her contrition? More importantly, did she forgive him? Did she wish to know more of him and perhaps forge a friendship, for Jane's sake, or for her own as well?

All of the uncertainty and possibilities were beginning to give her a headache. Each question led to another, each one more difficult, with no hope of any reasonable answers. She ceased her circuitous sequence of interminable questions with a resolute

commitment; if she somehow found herself in Mr. Darcy's company, she would make every effort to understand his character, without the imposition of prejudice.

1. Illustration of Character

In the short time since receiving Elizabeth's letter, Mr. Darcy's confidence had returned, mostly due to the letter's contents, which he viewed as more than just a peace offering. It was an invitation to redeem himself.

Confidence was an essential part of his character, built upon and fortified by a long history of successes. He had rarely backed away from any challenge put before him, mental or physical. Now, driven by a determination that was exceeded only by his intense desire, the resolute man of action did what he did best, he formulated his plan.

He had a deep-seated need to obtain Elizabeth's forgiveness and alter her ill-opinion, and this had burgeoned into his wish to earn her regard. Seeing her again brought forth a resurgence of his need for her, and he could no longer attempt to convince himself otherwise. Once he had allowed himself to acknowledge the sheer joy and vibrancy she would bring to his life, he could not bear to contemplate a future without her. He would apply his tactical acumen in an area previously unfamiliar, proving himself worthy.

He had seized the opportunity to correct past regressions, beginning with his disclosure to Bingley. Armed with the information he had gathered from his new ally, he continued to carry out his plan of action. Time was of the essence, and he was not about to squander it.

He spotted them at the far end of the park, near the pond Sarah had mentioned was her favorite play area. He walked unnoticed under the shelter of the trees, grateful for a few moments to enjoy the lovely sight of Elizabeth's merriment. Her musical laughter transcended the present. With a clarity that defied reality, he envisioned her playing and laughing with their children on the rolling green lawns of Pemberley. And in this lively scene, he viewed himself joining in the gaiety, just as naturally as if the many years since he had truly laughed had never been.

Drawn out of his reverie by their voices, he watched as Elizabeth held Sarah by the hands and was spinning her around so quickly the girl's feet floated above the ground. When she finally let go and righted her position, Sarah tottered dizzily about, laughing hysterically. The two older boys with them were clapping and laughing as well.

He approached slowly with his hands behind his back. Sarah saw him first and immediately called out to him. The girl ran in his direction with a big smile on her face and her long, dark curls fluttered behind her. She stopped before the gentleman and demonstrated her best curtsy as she greeted him.

"Good day, Mr. Darcy."

"Good day, Miss Sarah," he replied with a wink and bowed. He took a deep breath, trying to subdue the tension he suddenly felt upon Elizabeth's approach. The air was all at once thick and heavy, filled with every emotion he had ever felt for her, and every tender thought he had left unspoken. Their eyes met, and he was certain that the flush of his cheeks matched hers.

"Good day, Miss Bennet. It is a pleasure to see you," he said warmly.

He had chosen to take the lead in this conversation instead of falling back into his usual pattern of quiet adoration of her. He was determined to prove he was capable of pleasant discourse. Mr. Darcy had indeed heeded her words, and he held nothing of their tumultuous past against her.

"I hope I am not intruding. I had promised Miss Sarah a daisy crown," he said as he brought his right hand from behind his back and placed the crown upon the girl's head. She squealed with delight.

Elizabeth smiled and welcomed him to join them. The park setting and presence of the children seemed to ease the awkwardness of the meeting for both of them.

"I thank you, Mr. Darcy!" Sarah exclaimed as she twirled about. "It is lovely."

"You are quite welcome, Miss Sarah." Darcy turned and glanced shyly at Elizabeth as he handed her a second daisy crown. "I remembered how becoming you looked at the Netherfield Ball with flowers in your hair, Miss Bennet, and so I decided to bring you one as well."

Elizabeth's blush and quiet thank you calmed his nerves a great deal.

The two boys, James and Michael, bowed politely as they were introduced to Mr. Darcy and then reminded their cousin that she had promised they could visit the pond to feed the ducks and practice skipping stones. The children raced ahead while Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy followed at a more respectable pace,

both staring intently at their feet, as if unsure of the ground before them. All of their previous misunderstandings were looming impediments to be cautiously circumnavigated and left behind on the furrowed path to new-found common ground.

The gentleman's degree of unease was increasing again when he suddenly remembered his other gift. Thus, he handed Elizabeth a gorgeous bunch of wildflowers tied with a yellow satin ribbon.

"They are beautiful!" The lady exclaimed.

"They are just flowers for you, bright and lively." He desperately hoped she understood his meaning but at the same time did not want to be too forward.

"I thank you, Mr. Darcy," she accepted them with grace and then colored under his intense gaze.

He watched in fascination as she blushed deeply and lightly stroked the yellow ribbon, as unexpected shyness overcome her.

He reveled in the joy that giving her pleasure brought him. Now he understood what men for centuries before him had intuitively known; the importance of

courtship. In that aspect, Elizabeth had been correct in declaring his arrogance. By his presumption, he had determined that he merely need offer to be accepted and had held his position above the humbling enterprise of courtship. He had thought only to convince himself and had given no consideration to her sentiments.

After demonstrating how best to skip stones and awing the boys with a quadruple skip, Darcy guided Elizabeth to a bench where they could sit and observe the children.

"She looks very much like you." He broke the silence as he nodded in the girl's direction.

Upon meeting Miss Sarah Gardiner, he had been immediately reminded of Elizabeth, and perhaps that explained his ease in her presence. She had similar dark brown eyes and long curly hair, but there was even more similarity in her manners. She was open, friendly, and precocious, much as he imagined a young Elizabeth to have been. He had long been attracted to Elizabeth's youthful spontaneity and exuberance because it was such a contrast to his own quiet, reserved nature.

Elizabeth laughed. "I am reminded of that

frequently by my aunt and uncle, usually when dear Sarah has just gotten into mischief of some kind."

"So you were a mischief-maker in your youth?" He dared to tease.

"I would never be so foolish as to confess any such thing, Mr. Darcy," she replied with mock indignity, her eyes sparkling. "I will only say my curiosity and love of adventure occasionally led me astray. I have never been one to listen to the words you cannot. And those words are spoken all too often to young ladies," she paused with sudden pensiveness and then continued in her more usual light-hearted manner. "And you, Mr. Darcy, were you a troublesome boy?" she asked with a saucy grin. "Remember before you answer, I have had conversations with your cousin!"

A wave of jealousy passed through him at the mention of Fitzwilliam. Jealousy was but one of the many new emotions he had been forced to confront since making the acquaintance of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. He was surprised by the strength of his feelings and took care to conceal them from her, for they would not serve him well in his appeal to her. The memory of Fitzwilliam's and Elizabeth's

congeniality in Kent incited his envy, but he buried it under the reminder that this saucy grin was for him, not his cousin.

Mr. Darcy smiled. "Just the usual boyhood pranks, I believe. I was rather spoiled and indulged by my parents, but I do seem to recall my most severe punishments involved Fitzwilliam in some manner." He was pleased they were able to discuss a topic related to their time in Kent without too much tension.

"He mentioned he had a fondness for leading his younger cousin astray."

He drew a deep breath. The time had come. As much as he hated to do anything that might interrupt the felicity of the moment, his compulsion to apologize and attempt to rid himself of the burden of their past confrontation forced him to speak. He cleared his throat. "Miss Bennet, I--"

Sarah's loud cry halted his words as he and Elizabeth rushed to the girl's side, who had fallen and was now clutching her bloody knee.



At the Gardiners' door, Elizabeth thanked

him for the flowers and for carrying Sarah home.

"It was my pleasure, Miss Bennet," he paused and glanced down. "I... I hoped to speak with you." He paused again.

With a level of social adeptness that had always impressed him, Elizabeth responded, "We are only two more days in town. Jane and I extended our visit so that we may attend the Kirkland's ball tomorrow evening, and then we return home."

"Kirkland, you say?"

"Yes, do you know them?"

"I believe I do," he answered as his mind raced.

"Will you be attending as well?"

"I am sure I will. Tomorrow evening then," he bowed. "Good day, Miss Bennet."

At this early stage in their re-acquaintance, he did not want to read too much into her behavior, but he indulged his optimism that she appeared to be giving him a chance.



"Where is it?" he exclaimed, voicing his

frustration as he hurriedly rifled through the stack of envelopes, scattering them about haphazardly as he searched.

"Jenkins!" he shouted. "Where is the bloody invitation to the blasted Kirkland ball?"

"I have it here, sir, with the remainder of the declined invitations. I was about to send it off." Jenkins was taken aback by the emotional outburst of his usually steady master.

"No, no. I will attend. Send them a note that I am pleased to be their guest."

The butler could not recall having seen Mr. Darcy in such an animated state, but it was a vast improvement over the irritable and sullen mood he had displayed during recent weeks. He raised a surprised brow. "As you wish, sir."

"Yes, I wish." Darcy took the stairs two at a time in his haste to his chambers. "I wish a great many things!"

1. The Trouble of Practising

Elizabeth quietly escaped through the open doors into the cool, welcoming stillness of the night to be alone with her thoughts. Those thoughts centred upon the one person she was determined to understand, but who continually bewildered her to the point of vexation. In the park, Mr. Darcy had seemed so desirous to please and free from the reserve. However, the mere passing of time at the ball transformed him from the attentive, unassuming gentleman into the disgruntled, pacing effigy that stood in his place. She was vexed at the gentleman because she could not comprehend his behaviour, and she was annoyed with herself because she could not stop thinking about him.

With her mind thusly occupied, Elizabeth failed to notice she had been followed.

"Miss Bennet."

The sound of the male voice startled her out of her reverie, and she flinched from the fright. "Oh, Mr. Hayes, I had not realized you were there," she exclaimed as her hand pressed against her pounding heart.

"I did not intend to alarm you, madam. I enjoyed our dance together very much and hoped for an opportunity to speak with you. I could not help but notice the room dim upon your absence. You really are so very lovely." He was stepping closer and closer as he spoke.

Elizabeth was discomfited and alarmed by the familiarity of his words, as well as the indecorum of his approach, but before she could respond, another gentleman happened to appear just in time to rescue her from the undesired encounter.

"Ah, there you are, Miss Bennet!" Mr. Darcy called to her loudly as he passed through the doorway. "I have been sent on a mission by your sister to find you," he continued as he scowled at Mr. Hayes.

"I was just leaving." Mr. Hayes cowered as he bowed, not missing the intent in Mr. Darcy's stern look.

Mr. Hayes hurriedly took his leave, and Mr. Darcy pointedly asked, "What were you thinking, walking out here?"

"I needed some fresh air," she said. "And I certainly did not invite him, if that is what you are implying." His reprimanding tone, combined with the uncertainty between them,

made her feel suddenly defensive. "Besides, I was perfectly fine. I am quite capable of taking care of myself, Mr. Darcy," she countered.

"Miss Bennet, this is London, not Meryton!" His voice exploded. "He was not interested in the air!"

She stared at him in amazement. "And how is it that you are so sure what Mr. Hayes was interested in?" she questioned, forcing herself to remain calm despite his anger.

"I am a man," he answered very deliberately in a quieter voice.

"I had noticed," she quipped.

"Good," he said gruffly as he stepped close to her, imposingly tall and straight, his eyes locked on hers.

Elizabeth felt her breath catch, and her pulse quicken as his physical presence suddenly overcame her in a way that was completely new to her. Her body seemed determined to undermine her composure at a time when she required it the most.

He finally broke their silence as he said in an apologetic tone, "Miss Bennet, please forgive my outburst, but perhaps you will believe me if I tell you that I have known Mr.

Hayes for years and that he is not of good character."

"Oh," she hesitated. "But then why would the Kirklands invite him?"

"I do not know."

She bit her lip thoughtfully. "Are you a frequent guest?"

"No."

"Why are you here tonight?" she persisted, slightly annoyed by his brevity.

"That is indeed a good question," he paused before continuing. "My reason is, well, I believe some might refer to it as taking the trouble of practicing."

Elizabeth was surprised by his candor. His appealing look compelled her to attempt to discern the truth, and not prejudice him, perhaps unfairly, as she had in the past. The fluctuation of his mood puzzled her. Mr. Darcy had previously acknowledged his unease conversing with strangers, which she had construed as those he considered beneath him. Surely the polished London society was more to his liking than that of the quaint Meryton gatherings. Something about the situation tonight had altered his earlier congenial

disposition. His stern countenance and constant pacing reminded her of his behavior when she first met him, and then again at the Netherfield ball.

"Are you uncomfortable because of the large number of people here tonight?"

"No. While large gatherings are not my preference, they have been an unavoidable part of my life for so long, I hardly give them much thought, and I always adhere to decorum," he added defensively.

"Certainly, if adhering to decorum means stalking about in ill-humor and avoiding everyone," she challenged him.

"I have not avoided everyone, and the surplus of society here is not the cause of my ill-humor tonight." He stared at her intently.

"May I ask what is then?" she questioned with a raised brow.

"I had thought that was rather obvious, but I will tell you if you truly do not know. I came with the express intent of talking with you, and, other than a few brief words and dance, have been thwarted. Instead, I have been forced to watch you flutter about on the arm of every man here--" He stopped abruptly,

suddenly conscious he said too much.

Amused by his petulance, she laughed.

"That is not the response I expected, madam," he said sheepishly, obviously expecting her to be angry.

"But how can I not laugh, Mr. Darcy? We are at a ball. That is what people do at a ball. They dance. A lady has no control over who asks her to dance, or who does not." She watched his expression with interest as her meaning quickly sank in, and a small smile passed his lips. "Furthermore, you know very well if she declines one offer, politeness dictates she decline all others. That would be a shame, would it not?"

"Though it appears that I am failing miserably, I am attempting to correct my ways, Miss Bennet."

Such an admission from a man of so much pride excited not only astonishment but also respect. She knew her words of refusal had deeply wounded him, as his expression had clearly indicated at the time. He had withstood her insults, endured her rejection, and now, still sought her company, revealing more about his character than she could ever hope to learn in parlor conversations. He had

taken her words to heart and acted upon them, earning her esteem.

"I know you are," she reassured him softly, only to be smitten by the dimples of his broad smile. Sarah was right. He was devastatingly handsome when he smiled like that.

Elizabeth was amazed at what little effort it took on her part to make him happy and was further surprised at her own pleasure from doing so. Much to her chagrin, she had to admit her feminine sensibilities were flattered by his attention and even his barely veiled jealousy.

They were still speaking when dinner was announced, and the thrum of the passing assembly of guests disrupted their conversation. Elizabeth was thankful for the reprieve. Their exchanges ranged far from the mundane topics of the weather and health dictated by the standards of polite society. She worried the exhilaration she felt clouded her judgment at a time when more than ever, she needed to be circumspect and cautious. She was unequal to the task of appraising Mr. Darcy's attention while her own emotions remained uncertain.

When the last dance of the night was

announced, Elizabeth heard a familiar deep voice coming from behind.

"I believe you promised this last dance to me, Miss Bennet." Mr. Darcy's strong hand claimed her delicate one and led her to the dance floor. He was surprised by her resistance and felt her stumble beside him, stopping their advance abruptly.

"Mr. Darcy," she whispered as she blushed and tilted her head to the right.

"Miss Bennet?" he asked, confused.

"Mr. Darcy," she repeated quietly, nodding her head again. His eyes followed hers as they darted to the chair on their right. There, under the chair, he spotted a small beaded ivory-colored slipper. He bent close to her ear as she whispered, "I slipped it off for a moment, and just before you pulled me unexpectedly."

"Guided," he corrected her in the same whisper.

"No, you most definitely pulled," she said challengingly, trying to hide her anxiety.

"Well?" she questioned still in a whisper, her flush more pronounced.

"Allow me, Miss Bennet," he whispered back with a grin. He casually picked up the

wayward slipper and placed it beside her skirt. She nonchalantly stepped over it, balanced on his steady arm, and slid her foot into the shoe.

When her flushed face beamed thanks up at him, he stared back at her so intently she was afraid he might kiss her right then and there, and worse yet, at that moment, she could not think of anything but his enticing lips.

Shortly, the spell between them was broken when the music started, drawing them into the dance.

"There is never a dull moment with you, Miss Bennet," he teased.

"I am glad you appreciate my liveliness, Mr. Darcy," she retorted, totally unaware of how her words affected him. Their conversation continued haltingly as the steps of the dance brought them apart and together.

"Little did I know when I left home this evening that I would be gifted with the sight of your bare toes!" Mr. Darcy said daringly.

Her eyes widened at his provocative statement, but her rejoinder was quick, and his gloat for having left her momentarily speechless was short-lived.

"You, sir, did not even glimpse my bare

toes," she said in a hushed voice that only he could hear.

"I most assuredly did, Miss Bennet!"

"Pray tell then, Mr. Darcy, what color were they?" she questioned with a triumphant smile.

"They were colored?" he stammered as his head spun to follow her and he narrowly missed colliding with the dancer next to him.

A short time later, as the guests were departing, Mr. Darcy hurried to say goodbye to Elizabeth.

"Your company was most enjoyable this evening, Miss Bennet. Please allow me to express my gratitude with a proper goodbye." He bowed and gently kissed her hand.

Elizabeth would never be sure if it had been the influence of the wine she had consumed, the competitiveness of their scintillating verbal exchanges, or the surprise at the exquisite feel of his warm lips tenderly pressing the back of her hand that had spurred her outlandish reply. "That certainly does leave me wondering about an improper goodbye." She quickly turned to avoid seeing his face. "Good night, Mr. Darcy," she called

over her shoulder.

"Good night, Miss Bennet." She heard his choked reply as she sauntered away.

1. A Singular Accident

Mr. Darcy rode through the woods, following the footpaths in an organized search pattern. Keeping his focus on his task, he pushed aside his increasing worry for Elizabeth's safety and concern for the notable fading light of day. His rational and pragmatic mind told him she could not have gotten far on foot.

When his attention was arrested by a distant sound coming from deeper in the woods, he tied his horse securely and rushed towards the noise. He walked through the dense foliage; sticks and leaves were crackling under his boots. He called out her name again and again and was finally rewarded by the sound of her muffled voice calling back to him.

"Mr. Darcy! Be careful. Do not --"

His step suddenly faltered, and the next thing he knew, he was falling down a steep slope. Grasping at anything to stop his descent, his hand gripped a tree root, but it quickly gave way with the weight of his body.

"Mr. Darcy!" Elizabeth kneeled at his side.

He found himself sprawled on the ground of a deep, narrow pit.

"Mr. Darcy, are you injured?" she asked with apparent concern.

"Only my pride," he answered and stood, brushing himself off. "This must be a hunter's pit." He studied the fifteen-foot high walls of earth that surrounded them. "And you, Miss Bennet, are you injured?" he asked, suddenly realizing that she must have fallen into the pit as well.

"I am afraid I injured my ankle when I fell, and that is why I could not climb..." She blushed, and her words faltered. "Oh dear," she exclaimed after a moment, her eyes widening from worry. "You are bleeding, sir, your head."

He brought his hand up to where his forehead ached and felt a small laceration. "I must have hit my head when I fell. I will be fine."

"We need to bandage it to staunch the bleeding, sir."

Before Mr. Darcy could negate her solicitations, he felt blood streaming down his face, and he knew the cut was deeper than he

first suspected. He immediately began to untie his cravat. "Do not worry. 'Tis just a small injury," he reassured her. "We can use this. Will you, please?" he asked as he ripped it into strips and handed her one.

"Silk?" Elizabeth queried curiously as she fingered a strip of the torn cravat.

"Yes, well, the linen gives me a rash," he replied sheepishly.

Elizabeth grinned as she tied the long narrow strip securely around his head. Her mirth was a welcome change from the tension he had read on her countenance and easily worth the slight embarrassment such an unmanly confession had cost him.

"Do you always give your rescuers this much trouble, Miss Bennet?" he teased with the hope of encouraging her further.

"Is that not the duty of the damsel in distress?" she answered and batted her eyes at him in the most alluring way.

"May I?" Darcy asked as he bent to examine her ankle. She nodded, and he carefully removed her shoe to inspect the injury. He endeavored to keep his mind on assessing her wound, instead of the delicate arch of her foot

resting in his hand and her adorable toes just visible under her stocking... Her toes! "They are not colored!" he suddenly exclaimed boldly.

"Excuse me?" she asked, puzzled by his outburst.

"Your toenails. You told me they were colored."

Elizabeth laughed. "I did not say they were colored. I asked you, you who claimed to have seen them, what color they were to prove my point."

"Where did you ever learn of such things?" he asked, not sure he was prepared for her answer.

"Extensive reading does improve my mind. That was a little something I discovered in one of my father's books." Her chin lifted slightly with her pronouncement.

"In one of your father's books?"

"Yes, you know the ones on the highest shelves in the remote corners? Did you ever discover your father's best books, Mr. Darcy?" she questioned with that pert look that never failed to excite him.

"That is a question that defies a respectable

answer, Miss Bennet," he chuckled and shook his head.

Darcy examined Elizabeth's ankle and concurred it was probably a slight sprain. He immobilized it to the best of his ability with another strip of his cravat. When she thought he wasn't looking, he had seen her wince, confirming his suspicion the injury was painful, but she had not complained.

Once again, he surveyed their surroundings. "It appears there is only one way out of here, and that is up. If you can hold on securely to my back, I will be able to carry you up. You cannot bear weight on your injured ankle, and I cannot climb with you in my arms. We are losing light quickly, so there is no time for me to go for assistance. We have no other options, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth studied the hole surrounding them. "I agree, sir," she replied resolutely.

Darcy took a moment to admire her determination. Beauty and bravado. Who would have thought it such a potent combination?

She listened attentively and followed his instructions. He was grateful the task at hand required his utmost concentration and effort;

therefore, he had not time to focus on the feeling of her legs wrapped tightly about his waist. He concentrated on the placement of his hands and not her arms securely grasping his bare neck. Certainly, the pounding of blood through his body was due to the exertion of the climb, not the exquisite sensation of her full breasts pressed firmly against his back.

After they safely emerged from the pit, Darcy guided Elizabeth to rest on a fallen log while he retrieved his horse.

"Jane!" Elizabeth suddenly called out in alarm. "She is waiting for me. Oh, dear, she must be terribly worried. I have to go to her, Mr. Darcy!"

The man placed a hand on the lady's arm to calm her. "Mr. Bingley and I encountered her... waiting for you at the post." His voice was reassuring, his words carefully chosen so as not to reveal the severely distraught state of Miss Jane Bennet. "We were surprised because we thought you had departed London days ago," he continued. He and Bingley had deliberately set out three days after the ladies in an attempt to conceal their pursuit.

"Our travel plans were altered due to stormy weather. This has all been so unsettling

that I had not even thought to wonder how it was you came to discover my plight. What were, I mean how..." Elizabeth stammered, puzzled.

"Mr. Bingley and I were traveling to Netherfield for a hunting party, and that is how we happened upon your sister. She told us of the post delay, your walk about, and the delay in your return," he spoke cautiously. "As to your sister, it was decided that Mr. Bingley would escort her back to Longbourn in his carriage in which he and I were traveling. I set out on horseback promising to find you and return you safely."

"Jane... was she well?" Elizabeth's concern was still apparent.

Darcy had previously observed the closeness of the two sisters and knew Elizabeth would predict Miss Jane Bennet's distress over the situation. With a thoughtful look to her, he wondered if it was too much to hope that she would ever be this concerned about his welfare. "Miss Bennet, Mr. Bingley is quite devoted to your sister and will do everything to ensure her safety and happiness," he said warmly, knowing instantly his words had been precisely what she needed

to hear.

"I believe you are right!" She nodded.

Her delighted smile brought a luster to her eyes that nearly took his breath away. He felt a pang as he realized his next words would likely undo all of the reassurance he had just imparted. Daylight was fading, and he knew he had no other alternative.

"We must make haste if we are to find shelter before nightfall. There is no time to make the journey all the way back to town, but I remember passing a small cabin up ahead. We will try for that if you approve." He hoped his confidence overshadowed the grimness of their situation.

He watched as she hesitated, and the implication of his words registered. His heart ached at her stricken expression. This was not how it was supposed to be. Damn the Fates that had forced this upon them. It had only been a few weeks since her angry declaration that he was the last man in the world that she could marry. He knew he was making progress, but he needed more time. Despite this compromising position, he would ensure she would not be bound to him for any reason other than love. He knew now that he could

never be happy with anything less than her love.

After what seemed an eternity to him, she finally stood and took one small unsteady step toward him, her eyes suspiciously shiny.

"Mr. Darcy, I am so sorry. This is entirely my fault." Her voice wavered.

He shook his head as he reached for her hand and would not let her continue. "There is no need. Come, Miss Bennet," he spoke tenderly. And she did.

1. A Prodigious Deal of Care

The inside of the cabin fully reflected its unused state. While it was free of clutter, it also lacked in amenities, and Mr. Darcy found himself seated on the only chair while Elizabeth inspected his head wound.

"How does it look?" he queried.

"I am afraid the bleeding has not stopped," she answered, unable to hide her concern about the oozing wound.

"It will need to be stitched then."

She nodded. "But we have to do something until you can see a doctor."

"No. It cannot wait. Do you happen to have a needle in that little bag of yours? Georgiana often carries her needlework with her." He glanced around the cabin. "I doubt we will find much of help in here."

Flummoxed at the thought of where he might be going with this conversation, she hesitated to answer. The deep red, bloody stain saturating the bandage that had already been reinforced twice held her attention.

His focus returned to Elizabeth, his eyes questioning, as he waited for her response.

Unable to speak, she finally nodded her head.

"I will be forever grateful that you are an accomplished lady and travel with your needlework close at hand," he said sardonically, a small smile trying to make light of the situation.

She removed her needle and various threads from her reticule to hand them to him, but he shook his head; his hands remained firmly by his sides.

"Surely, you do not expect me to stitch the wound?" she cried in disbelief.

"I certainly cannot do it," he motioned to the awkward location of the wound. "So you are my only hope."

"But sir, I never have..." she stammered and searched for appropriate words. She was suddenly aware of the gravity of the situation as she could see he was struggling to remain in control, but his blood loss was weakening him. She drew in her breath and summoned every ounce of courage. "Very well, you are correct. I must be the one to do it." Elizabeth surprised even herself with the confidence her voice carried.

"It must be done quickly, Miss Bennet, as

the light will be leaving us soon," he reminded her. They had searched the cabin for candles and firewood upon entering and, finding none, had been resigned to do without.

It was decided that Mr. Darcy would lie on the bed for the procedure while Elizabeth sat on the chair. His increasing unsteadiness as he moved towards the bed alarmed her, and she slowly exhaled when he finally reclined. He was a large man, and Lizzy knew she would be hard-pressed to lift him should he fall.

Now that her mind was set to her task, she felt her composure quickly return.

"Mr. Darcy, where is your flask?"

He slowly opened his eyes at her question, and she explained before he could answer.

"This will be very painful without any alcohol. I thought some fine brandy or whatever you carry might dull the pain a bit. We can also use some to cleanse around the wound and needle."

He fumbled to retrieve the flask from his coat pocket. Elizabeth gently pushed his unsteady hand aside and pulled out a relatively large, ornate, silver flask. She carefully removed the cap, handed it back to

Mr. Darcy, and watched him take a deep drink.

"I will get everything in order while you finish that." She headed for the door, limping.

"Miss Bennet?" he called quietly, questioning her move.

"That is Doctor Bennet to you, sir!" she laughingly replied over her shoulder. "I am going to get the water from your saddle. When I return, we will begin, so please continue with the drink." She flashed him a warm, reassuring smile.

He nodded reluctantly. "Please be careful."

The concern in his voice touched her. "I will."

It had been obvious all along he was accustomed to taking charge of situations and was unused to relinquishing that control. Elizabeth admired this aspect of Mr. Darcy's character that at one time she would have declared domineering. On this day, it was most comforting.



Elizabeth winced as she carefully removed

the bloody bandage, exposing the gaping wound. She struggled to push the overwhelming thoughts of how it was she found herself in this distressing situation, about to attempt a frightfully foreign task, on a man, who only weeks ago she had disliked, but who now was rapidly growing in her esteem.

Mr. Darcy's eyes appeared glassy as the brandy took immediate effect due to his blood loss, earlier exertion, and the lack of food.

"Do not blame me if this leaves a scar on your handsome face," Elizabeth warned as she readied the needle with the purple thread he had selected.

"So... you think I am handsome?" He grinned, the brandy decreasing his inhibitions. "I am not at all concerned about some trifle of a scar, Elizabeth. We men wear our scars as a badge of honor."

She chose to overlook his use of her Christian name given their current situation and his nearing intoxicated state. Besides, she was starting to enjoy this lighter side of his character.

"You, sir, being an honorable man, I suppose you have a few?" she laughed.

"Loads of them," he said proudly between sips of brandy. "See this?" he asked as he pulled up his left shirtsleeve and pointed to a small thin line on his forearm. "That happened when I was a lad of eight. I fell out of a tree. The tallest tree at Pemberley."

"Of course it was the tallest tree," Elizabeth couldn't help her smirk.

He continued to turn and adjust his clothing to expose his surprisingly numerous scars and recounted the history of how he had obtained each one. Elizabeth enjoyed the image of a young Mr. Darcy, full of mischief. It wasn't until he pulled up his shirt and lowered the waist of his breeches to expose a long jagged scar on his right hip that she began to lose her composure.

She felt her face flush. She knew the gentleman was unaware of his actions' impropriety, and she knew she should look away, but she could not draw her eyes from his firm abdomen. She was spellbound by the thin trail of dark hairs that compelled her eyes to follow their path downward. She was sure her expression gave her far-from-pure thoughts away, but fortunately, he was so caught up in telling the story of the scar he did

not notice, or so she hoped. She hardly knew what he said; something about an escapade with his cousin, a bull, and a fence.

"We caught the devil for that," he laughed.

In her desperation to regain control of her composure, the actual sewing of his wound now seemed a welcome distraction from her thoughts and his exposed body.

Elizabeth felt him stiffen with each piercing of the needle through his skin, but he did not flinch and made no sound. He really was a strong and brave man. As she pulled the thread taut, she carefully tied off the last knot and inspected her work. Her fingers lightly traced the outline of the wound. "I think that will suffice. The bleeding has stopped. I hope it does not become infected. These conditions are hardly --"

"I thank you, Elizabeth." He interrupted her nervous ramble by catching her hand in his and gave it a reassuring squeeze as he held it next to his cheek.

His heartfelt gratitude touched her, and it took great effort to remain composed.

"Doctor Bennet," she reminded him. "You are welcome," added then softly as she dressed

the wound with the last strip of his cravat.
"Now you must rest," she commanded.

"Yes, Doctor Bennet. Anything you say, Doctor Bennet," he answered mockingly.

She hobbled about as she tidied up their surroundings as best she could, aware of his attention on her every move. When she finished, she seated herself once again in the chair, folded her arms in her lap, and closed her eyes.

"You are not going to sleep in that chair, Elizabeth."

She could not see his face well due to the darkness but could tell by the commanding tone of his voice that Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of his domain, who brooked no opposition, was back.

"I will be fine here," she responded, in what she hoped was an equally imperious tone.

"I will not have it," he said more forcefully.

"What do you suggest?" She immediately regretted her question, knowing full well that he would state the obvious.

"There is but one bed, if you can even call it that, and we will have to share it."

"It would not be proper," she stammered.

"What of this entire event has been proper, Elizabeth? This is called survival, and we still have a long journey ahead. We both need to be well-rested tomorrow." He slid to the far side of the bed and patted the space next to him.

She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head in defiance.

"You cannot spend the entire night in that position. You will further damage your ankle," he said, reminding her of her injury.

"I will elevate it," she answered stubbornly.

"You will be cold."

"I am quite comfortable."

"I will be cold," he whined. Elizabeth could not contain her laugh, which only encouraged the gentleman to continue. "I will be cold, and my wound will become infected because of it, and that will be your fault," he whined again.

"That will not do, Mr. Darcy! I have young cousins and therefore am quite immune to such ploys! Do you not have any better arguments, or has the brandy impaired your thoughts?" she challenged him.

"I am more coherent than you think, Elizabeth," he answered, surprising her with

the provocative tone of his words.

She refused to answer or move.

"Very well then, if you will not sleep here, then I will not sleep here." He slowly started to rise, moaning as he pressed his hand against his head.

Elizabeth rushed to his side to guide him back down. "You are being ridiculous, sir." She sat on the edge of the bed while she adjusted his bandage. The tension between them dissipated as he stared at her intently. His dark eyes were just visible in the fading light as they pleaded with her.

"I need you to trust me, Elizabeth." He spoke so earnestly she felt a tightening in her chest.

"I do," she whispered.

He pulled her gently down beside him. "I will see us through this safely," he said with confidence as he lightly stroked her hand.

She felt him relax and impulsively asked, "What tale will you tell of the acquisition of your newest scar?"

"This one was earned in the knightly service of rescuing my lady," he answered softly.

Elizabeth stifled her gasp as she slowly

turned to face him. He was already asleep.

She sighed, her eyes blinking, straining to see in the darkness of the night. She was so exhausted she could not clear her mind. How had she come to be in such an inconceivable position?

She considered the events that had led her to this point, and aside from falling into the hole, which obviously had not been a deliberate act, she could not find fault with any of the decisions she had made. Upon reflection, there indeed had not been many decisions at all, as most of the circumstances had offered no options. What had happened to her sensible, orderly, and predictable life? Were the Fates so determined to wreak havoc?

She turned to look upon the man sleeping quietly beside her. The room was lit only by the night sky creeping through the lone window, but their closeness allowed her to make out the outline of his handsome features. She laughed at the memory of his pleasure in her declaration of admiration.

Fate.

She would not deny that Mr. Darcy was controlling, obstinate, proud, and reserved. In an age when their fortune and rank valued

gentlemen, it was not surprising he was so. He was also intelligent, honest, and had a wry sense of humor. In addition, he had demonstrated he could be tender and thoughtful. All things considered, she supposed there were actually much worse futures than sharing a lifetime with such a man. She smiled down at him and carefully, caressingly repositioned the lock of hair that had fallen over his wound. Her finger traced around the purple stitches.

Fate, she thought again.

Just when she thought she had calmed herself enough to sleep, her eyes fell upon his bare abdomen where his shirt had fallen open. Her mind now raced with his words *my lady*, and countless images of him. She felt herself flush and her pulse quicken. Suddenly pictures from her father's books that had guided her self-study of human anatomy flashed before her. The radiant heat from his body warmed her palm, tempting it ever closer to his exposed flesh.

"Oh!" She retracted her hand in alarm, just before touching him. What would Mr. Darcy think of her if he knew her thoughts, she wondered in horror, certain this must be the

beginning of her fall into the abyss of wantonness.

Another hour passed until sleep finally overwhelmed her thoughts.

Fate.

1. Tempting Consideration

As Mr. Darcy slowly awoke the next morning, he was aware of his doubly painful head from both the wound and the after-effects of too much brandy. However, his pain was easily brushed aside as the pleasures of the rest of his body registered in his mind.

Elizabeth.

Somehow during the night, she had entwined herself all over and around him. Her head was nestled on his chest and shoulder. Long dark curls had escaped their confines, and she was on her side with her hip and leg draped over his. Most surprising of all was how her arm disappeared under his shirt, and her hand was tucked into the waist of his breeches.

While his body reveled in the feel of her embrace, his eyes feasted on her full round breasts spilling out of her low cut gown.

Drawing a deep breath, he braced himself and looked away, feeling very warm inside.

Her hair tickled his neck, and he wound one of the renegade curls around his finger. Her curls allured him to the point of

obsession. He had admired them from the moment he had first laid eyes on them at the Meryton Assembly. As she had walked away from him, they had bounced enticingly around her pale, slender neck, taunting him for some cruel words he had spoken in haste that were now long forgotten. He yearned for the privilege and honor of seeing her hair unbound, to touch it and caress it.

Her steady, even breathing told him she was still deep in sleep, giving him time to cherish the moment and formulate a plan.

What he wanted to do was kiss and caress every inch of her enticing, lush body, starting with her eyes and lips, and ever so slowly work his way down. Even with the hindrance of a head wound and residual effects from too much brandy, he knew he was ready, willing, and able. If her hand were just a little lower, there would be no choice, he told himself. However, he had asked for her trust, and she had willingly given it. He would not betray her - no matter how tempting her body was.

Mr. Darcy avowed to win her love. He was not above this painful metamorphosis if, in the end, he got what he wanted and knew he was better for it. The next time - for he was that

confident - the next time he awoke with her by his side, they would be husband and wife, and he would demonstrate to her how very much he loved her. But for the present, she had trusted him, and that trust carried a high price.

What he should do was what he did do. After one last, good long look, absorbing and memorizing all of what he felt and saw, he slowly and cautiously extricated himself from sleeping Elizabeth's hold and left the small cabin.



He had been in the company of countless handsome women, bedecked in the finest jewels and most fashionable attire, surrounded by the most opulent ballrooms London had to offer, but nothing had ever held him as captive as the sight of Miss Elizabeth Bennet appearing in the doorway of that ramshackle cabin in the middle of nowhere. Her clothes were rumpled, smudged, and in disarray, her dark riotous curls framing her pale, lovely face and her bright eyes searching for him, as he hoped.

Artless, in her manner, alluring in her simple, unadorned state, all the finery of wealth was superficial in comparison to her natural beauty.

Her slight, timid smile surprised him because she was usually so self-assured. He was suddenly conscious of his own appearance and quickly raked one hand through his own disheveled hair while his other hand passed over the stubble of his two-day scruff.

"Good morning, Miss Bennet," he managed to say as he neared her. "Please forgive my appearance."

He saw her immediately stiffen and worried about what he had said wrong.

"Only if you forgive mine," she replied curtly.

It dawned on him that she had mistaken his intention, and he quickly added, "There is no forgiving such beauty, Miss Bennet." He was pleased to see her blush, and she appeared at ease again. "Your ankle, is it feeling any better?"

"Yes, I thank you. It is less painful, and the swelling has gone down considerably. And how does your head feel, sir?"

"My wound is healing, but it is the inside of my head that is still suffering from the side effects of the alcohol. I am afraid I do not remember much of what transpired last night. I hope I was not too much of a bother," he fished.

Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, no. Quite the contrary! You are rather entertaining when you are in your cups," she said with a wry grin.

"What did I say?" His eyes widened in alarm. "What did I do?"

"I think I shall not tell you. Such details might prove a useful tool in the future."

He considered bribing her with tales of her own misdeeds but decided against it. The memory of her embrace was too precious for him to risk it being tarnished if she expressed regret. Her reference to the future had not escaped his notice, so whatever he had said or done must not have truly offended her.

"Miss Bennet, I think we must discuss our plan. I have given the matter much thought, and I think vague but truthful answers will serve us best. All will be explained in simple truths: I found you, you were injured, it was too late to travel. Therefore we stayed at a

small lodging near the posting station and waited until the morning to travel. We avoid detailed explanations but remain truthful. Everyone will be so pleased you are safe, and well, they will not be concerned with the particulars," Mr. Darcy explained confidently.

Elizabeth readily agreed with the plan and seemed more at ease, although she did attempt another apology. The gentleman, however, once again would not hear it.

Sharing his mount, they followed the direction of the road and soon reached the post where Elizabeth got apart from Jane. It had been decided she would ride in the post coach, and Darcy would follow on horseback.

Parting from her was surprisingly difficult. His hand lingered on hers as he gently assisted her into the coach. The tremor of her lower lip gave her a brave smile away, and he desperately wanted to believe that she felt the same reluctance. It was hard to put a reign on his eagerness when everything about her captivated him so. He had previously misinterpreted her lively spirit, and now his voice of reason reminded him to proceed with caution. Thus far, timely remembrances of her reproofs had held him in reserve, but their

shared intimacy of the past twenty-four hours had increased his yearning to declare himself.

"I will follow." He did not trust himself to say more.

"I thank you," was her quiet reply.

He mounted his stallion and rode in the position of guard, assuming his natural role of noble and formidable protector.

1. Official Interference

Elizabeth's homecoming was the great commotion Mr. Darcy had predicted. Her family was so relieved to see her that there were few questions, and those few were easily answered with the vague truths they had rehearsed. Elizabeth was coddled, Mr. Darcy was thanked, and the atmosphere at Longbourn was jubilant.

Just as Elizabeth was starting to become complacent concerning the whole incident, she was suddenly overcome with panic when Mr. Bingley exclaimed, "Darcy! Have you injured your head?"

With everyone's attention upon him, Mr. Darcy gave an embarrassed shrug. "It is nothing of consequence, Bingley."

"Are those purple stitches?" Bingley persisted inquisitively as he moved to examine the sutures more closely. "I say, Darcy, what kind of doctor did you see? Or is this the latest London trend? Purple stitches, indeed. I rather like them! That is the neatest, tidiest sewing I have ever seen, but of course, you only see the best of doctors."

Once she had realized their secret was still safe, Elizabeth could not help herself from delighting in the admiration of her work. It was far more personally gratifying than the praise of some trivial floral sampler. She smiled smugly at Mr. Darcy - until she noted the gleam in his eye as he looked directly at her.

"Yes, I am very particular about a doctor's medical skill, but I have recently come to appreciate something more," said he.

Mr. Bingley looked at Mr. Darcy questioningly, waiting for him to continue.

He was still staring at Elizabeth when he added, "A good bedside manner. Yes, a good bedside manner is most important."

Elizabeth blushed and turned her head. She was disappointed no witty retort came to her mind, but then decided it was probably best to let the subject drop. Mr. Darcy was proving himself very adept at innuendo. His cleverness challenged her in ways she found oddly exciting.

She watched with interest as the man endeavored to participate in conversations occasionally. While she viewed some of his mannerisms more favorably merely by virtue

of her enlightenment, there also was a certain change in his demeanor toward her family. He would never be the jovial gentleman Mr. Bingley was, and this made her appreciate his effort all the more.

That night as Elizabeth relished the comfort of her bed, she was surprised how restorative distance from the events, perhaps aided by a touch of denial, seemed to be. The simple truths would become a reality but for the shadow of a secret shared.



The dinner party at her Aunt and Uncle Philips' honoring the militia had been unavoidable. Elizabeth was apprehensive about coming face to face with Mr. Wickham as her confidence in her own abilities had been shaken by the events in Kent. After two full days of rest, she could no longer plead fatigue, and she knew if she used her ankle as an excuse, she would risk further house confinement. Besides, Mr. Wickham had to be reckoned with at some point.

Her outward calm demeanor belied the inner turmoil she felt as Mr. Wickham stood

before her. His fine countenance, good figure, and pleasing address, now tarnished by the truth, no longer appealed to her, and she felt a sudden resurgence of shame for her previous lack of discernment.

"Mr. Wickham," she politely curtsied.

"Miss Bennet. How do you do? You are looking lovely, as always. It is such a pleasure to see you. I am very glad you have returned safely. I heard of your mishap and rightfully worried for your well-being." He greeted her with his usual affable air, which she now fully recognized as the affectation it truly was. Elizabeth was appalled he thought a few kind words would reestablish him in her good graces and that by merely renewing his attentions to her, her preference would be secured.

"I am well, thank you. My ankle remains somewhat sore at times, but otherwise, I am in good health, thanks to Mr. Darcy."

"Darcy? Yes, I had heard he put himself out--"

"Whether or not he was put out, you will have to ask him." Her anger caused her to interrupt him. She was growing more furious by the second, though whether she was

angrier at Mr. Wickham and his presumptuousness, or at herself for once having succumbed to his duplicitous manner, was open to debate.

"As I mentioned before, Darcy is capable of acting the gentleman if and when he feels so inclined. I am sure the opportunity to play the hero to an attractive lady was too tempting a boost for his already over-inflated self-opinion." He laughed and looked at Elizabeth as if he expected her to join in his derision. Elizabeth felt pangs of guilt for having once encouraged such scornful remarks about Mr. Darcy.

Fighting back any outward signs of animosity, and strengthened by the desire to defend Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth answered, "That is an astonishing statement coming from you, Mr. Wickham, but since I know the truth of the matter, I suppose I should not be surprised. I have come to learn initial impressions may be deceiving, but I do feel that eventually true character is revealed. I will always be grateful for Mr. Darcy's assistance, but he had risen in my esteem prior to that occasion." Her calm tone hid her anger well, but with any luck, her words would

discourage him from endeavoring to further their acquaintance.

Elizabeth watched Mr. Wickham's malevolent expression at her remarks with some trepidation. The sudden feral look in his eyes as she defended Mr. Darcy was frightening, and she feared she might have said too much. His agitation passed, but Elizabeth remained guarded. "As I mentioned before, Miss Bennet, I am glad you are well." He resumed his gentle accent and hastily excused himself.

The rest of the evening passed with a polite distance between them and the appearance of congeniality. They parted with a civility Elizabeth was certain neither of them felt.



Elizabeth's ankle was healing quickly, but it still impeded her ability to escape the confines of home. She had to limit her fresh air excursions to the immediate gardens, which, while pretty and inviting, were hardly an adequate substitute for her daily long walks. Moreover, this left her vulnerable to her mother's attention.

Mrs. Bennet's latest point of interest was the return of the Thompson family's eldest son, who had been away at Cambridge and now returned to take over the family estate. To her mother, he was of prime eligibility being a single, relatively handsome gentleman with three thousand pounds a year -- all of the qualifications she required for a suitable husband for one of her daughters. Being relatively handsome was a bonus. Mr. Bingley's return had rejuvenated Mrs. Bennet's hopes for Jane making a match with him, thus leaving Elizabeth to be paired off with Mr. Thompson's three thousand pounds. While he was a pleasant enough gentleman, Elizabeth knew she had no other feeling for him but friendship.

Elizabeth found herself taking extra care preparing her appearance for dinner that evening. She laughed at herself as she adjusted her gown and hair for the umpteenth time. She was finally ready to acknowledge that she was looking forward to seeing Mr. Darcy again. Elizabeth was becoming aware of her awakening romantic sensibilities and her curious responsiveness to his commanding physical presence in all of its forms: his tall

stalwart frame so deceptively lithe; his light musky scent reminding her of the forest on a clear day; his strong, broad shoulders and muscular arms that had carried her effortlessly; the deep, refined timbre of his voice that could be as tender one moment as it was authoritative in another; his magical hands that wielded power with a simple wave and ignited a spark within her with his slightest touch; and his dark penetrating eyes that focused upon her with an intensity that at once made her feel uneasy and exhilarated. She smiled as she considered the man she formerly only ridiculed was now constructed into a paradigm of manly perfection. She wondered if love turned all sensible people into silly, irrational creatures. And there it was, love. She loved him. She finally admitted her feelings to herself, and it was wonderfully liberating.

Elizabeth knew Mr. Darcy was exactly the sort of man in disposition and talents who would most suit her. She now knew she had been mistaken in attributing his power merely to his affluence. She had seen beyond the trappings of his wealth and found a man of steadfast and honest character. His

understanding and temper, though unlike her own, answered all her wishes.

Her high hopes for a pleasant evening came to fruition owing in part to two major turns of good fortune. One was that the Thompsons were unable to attend, limiting the dinner party guests to the Philips' and the gentlemen from Netherfield, thus sparing Elizabeth from her mother's match-making endeavors, at least for the night. The second also involved her mother. It seemed having come to her daughter's rescue had raised Mr. Darcy's merit in her mother's estimation, and she had ceased her constant derision of the gentleman.

Despite Mrs. Bennet's new-found tolerance for Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth had been concerned when she discovered he was seated next to her mother during dinner. Dissatisfied with her own position at the far end of the table, she surreptitiously kept an eye on them during most of the meal. She was surprised to see them engaged in what appeared to be a lively conversation. She was unsure whether that spoke well of her mother's behavior or ill of Mr. Darcy's state of mind. Maybe his head injury had been more severe than she had thought and had knocked the sense right out

of the man.

Her opportunity to talk with him finally came when he positioned himself conveniently by her side as she was overseeing the card tables.

"How was your dinner, Mr. Darcy?" she asked politely.

"My dinner was excellent, Miss Bennet, I thank you. At first, I was a little disappointed with the seating arrangements, but once I was settled, I found myself enjoying the meal immensely. When plied with the right questions, your mother is a fount of information," he answered with a wry grin.

"I am having a difficult time conceiving a topic on which my mother could inform you, Mr. Darcy. Could it be the hiring of good help or the art of designing menus? Pray, do tell, I am fully curious." Elizabeth was utterly intrigued now.

"While she might be knowledgeable regarding such topics, I was referring to one of far greater interest." He paused dramatically, causing Elizabeth to raise her brow at him in mock censure. "You, Miss Bennet," he said pointedly.

"Me?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, you. Let me see if I can remember it all." His hand stroked his chin, and he had that hint of a smile she had come to admire.

"Hmm. You once stole the turkey that was to be served for dinner. You smuggled a litter of kittens under your bed. You were banned from the stables when you were caught riding the carriage horses." He playfully admonished her with a tsk-tsk and shake of his head before continuing, "Your recent ankle injury was not your first, as you once sprained your ankle when you fell out of a tree. You used to cry when quail was served at meals." He paused for a moment. "Oh, and a gentleman you find interesting, a Mr. Thompson, has moved back into the area," he added solemnly as he fidgeted with his cuff.

Elizabeth laughed, though she was mindful of the change in his countenance with his last statement, and she had every intention of correcting her mother's faulty conjecture. "If you managed to elicit such extraneous tales from my mother during one dinner, Mr. Darcy, it is a wonder you ever had the opportunity actually to consume anything of sustenance. In addition, you should not believe everything

my mother says."

"Really? Pray tell which of her anecdotes was lacking in veracity? I must know."

"I will tell you merely to make my point. I did not steal the turkey. I set it free. It was puppies, not kittens. Kittens would have been much easier to hide, and I am sure I would have succeeded with that! I was not banned from the stables. My father simply reminded me that carriage horses are not meant for jumping fences. I did not fall out of the tree. I jumped. And Mr. Thompson is a friend of the entire family, and that is the full extent of our acquaintance."

"I am very glad you were able to clarify those points so eloquently, Miss Bennet. Very glad indeed." He smiled that disarming smile of his, and Elizabeth suddenly felt warm all over.

As the gentlemen were leaving, Mr. Bingley announced his sisters had arrived from London earlier in the day. He extended an invitation to the ladies of Longbourn to join them for tea the following afternoon. Mrs. Bennet assured him that Jane and Elizabeth would be happy to accept and indicated that everyone else had previous engagements.



Upon greeting their guests, the Bingley sisters hardly masked their reluctance to serve as hostesses for such company. Having partaken of the light refreshments and having listened to Miss Bingley enumerate all the superiorities of London society, Elizabeth excused herself under the pretense of freshening up. She had deliberately delayed her return to the drawing-room, believing that hobbling up and down the Netherfield hallways and admiring the art was preferable to the pretentious ramblings of the Bingley sisters. She promised herself to return to Jane's side after a short respite.

Masculine voices from the library caught her attention as she passed the open door. It was not her intent to eavesdrop, but the voices were loud.

"I agree. It is a wretched situation, Darcy, and had you not told me, I would not have ever imagined it possible."

"I have dealt with situations such as this my entire adult life. You know me well, Bingley, I will not be force marched to the altar."

"But do you really think she planned that whole elaborate scene? I had not thought her capable of such deceit."

"I doubt her ankle was really injured at all, but I placated her by pretending it was."

Elizabeth gasped in horror. She could not force herself to listen any longer. All she could think of was escaping this nightmare. She turned to run, but her lame steps faltered as the words thundered in her ears, echoing over and over again. She blindly made her way back to the sitting room and graciously excused herself from the ladies' company professing sudden illness. Her stricken countenance supported her claim, and Jane insisted on accompanying her home, despite Elizabeth's protests for Jane to stay.

Somehow she managed to contain her tears until she was behind the sheltering doors of her room whereupon they flowed freely and unabated as she sobbed into her pillow.

Mr. Darcy believed her injury was a contrived plot to get him to the altar? That did not make any sense. She had turned down his offer of marriage. Did he think she had come to regret her refusal and was now seeking his fortune? After all, they had been through, how

could he think her capable of such deceit?

It was his own reputation he was protecting by preventing a scandal. How had she so blatantly misconstrued his manner? But Elizabeth knew what she had heard. As wounding as those words were to hear, she could at least be thankful she had heard them before she foolishly allowed her own feelings to be known. What a triumph for him that would have been.

Trembling and anguished, Elizabeth pulled the covers closer around herself, seeking comfort in the soft warmth. Within the confines of her cocoon, she would grieve, and she promised herself when she emerged, she would better protect her fragile heart.

1. It Ought To Be So

Darcy left his lathered stallion to the care of the groom as he hastened back to Netherfield to bathe and change before Miss Bennets' afternoon visit. He was eagerly awaiting their arrival and hoped for some time alone with Elizabeth. He had sensed her gradual warming to him, and he had every desire to promote it further. His life being what it was, patience was not a virtue he had ever needed to practice, and he was finding it quite taxing to do so now.

He heard a strange rustling sound as he rounded the corner of the walking path and was greeted by the unexpected sight of Miss Bingley, sprawled rather inelegantly on the ground before him.

"Oh, Mr. Darcy, thank goodness you happened along! I tripped and fell while on my morning walk. I seem to have injured my ankle. It is so very painful. I do not think I can walk on it," Miss Bingley said, all the while smiling coyly up at him. "No, I am quite sure that I cannot walk," she insisted.

"Yes, well... it is fortunate I came along," he

answered warily, noting her odd pleasure as she declared her pain.

"Do you not want to look at it to see how badly it is injured?" she said as she pulled her skirt up far higher than needed to reveal her ankle.

"No!" He practically shouted. "That will not be necessary. I can see you are uncomfortable." He tried to make his lie sound convincing. What can she be about, he wondered.

She smiled up at him.

"I am certain your brother will be very concerned."

She nodded.

"I think it best that you remain here and rest while I inform him." He watched her smile turn to a frown. "I am sure he will want to assist you himself."

"But, Mr. Darcy, do you not want to carry me in your arms to the comfort and privacy of my chambers?" she cried disappointedly to his rapidly retreating back.



"Darcy, I really am sorry. I do not know what has come over my sister," Bingley lamented as he nervously paced back in forth in his library. "First, she shows up here with Louisa and Hurst unexpectedly, complaining about anything and everything. And now this!"

"I am sorry too, Bingley. Her behavior is disturbing, and I must tell you, though you will not like hearing it, last night she spoke inappropriately and tried to follow me into my room. After her aggressive behavior this morning, something must be done. I have tried to overlook her forwardness, but it has escalated to the point where I can no longer ignore it." Darcy's frustration had reached the level that even his desire not to offend his friend could not silence him any longer.

"I agree." Bingley nodded. "It is a wretched situation, Darcy, and had you not told me I would not have ever imagined it possible."

"I have dealt with situations such as this my entire adult life. You know me well, Bingley, I will not be force marched to the altar," Darcy said vehemently.

"But do you really think she planned that whole elaborate scene? I had not thought her capable of such deceit."

"I doubt her ankle was really injured at all, but I placated her by pretending it was."

"I will talk to her later after Miss Bennets leave. I think it would be best for her to return to London," Bingley announced resolutely.

Darcy nodded in agreement. He did not want any potential impediment to his courtship with Elizabeth, and the vitriolic Miss Bingley could easily become one. He had not forgotten her ill-mannered displays when in Elizabeth's company in the past.

The gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing-room only to discover that Miss Bennets had just departed due to Miss Elizabeth's sudden illness.

"I must say Miss Eliza did look dreadfully ill, did she not, Louisa? Yes, she looked positively dreadful," Miss Bingley said spitefully. "It is just as well that you were not exposed to whatever it was she has come down with."



It had been three long days since Darcy had last seen Elizabeth. He had called daily at

Longbourn with Bingley, but she never made an appearance, and the gentlemen were told she was not feeling well enough to take visitors. Her illness was spoken of only in vague terms.

While out on his customary early morning ride, he was not surprised to find he had unconsciously headed toward Longbourn. Elizabeth had been on his mind almost constantly, and he was beginning to lose patience not knowing of her well-being.

He was pleasantly startled by the sight of the very woman who consumed his thoughts. He watched her slowly strolling through the middle gardens of Longbourn, a short distance in front of him.

"Elizabeth," he said softly with relief, as his eyes took comfort in the beauty that had been denied him all those past days.

In his hurry to see her, he hastened upon her unaware.

"Miss Bennet, you are well?" He knew immediately by the distressed look on her face all was not well. She was not pleased to see him.

"Good day, Mr. Darcy," she said coldly,

avoiding his eyes.

"I have been very concerned about you. Your mother and sister said that you were not well enough for visitors. Is it your ankle? Perhaps my doctor from London should examine it." His worry poured out as he spoke.

"That will not be necessary, I thank you. My ankle is nearly mended," she answered abruptly as she headed in the direction of the house.

"I am very glad to hear that."

He followed her closely. After having waited days to speak with her, he had no intention of letting this opportunity pass, although he was greatly troubled by her mood.

"Miss Bennet, I had hoped to speak with you. Actually, there is much that has been on my mind for a while now."

She stopped on the landing, turned, and startled at his nearness. "I do not think there could be much left for us to say to one another, Mr. Darcy." She cut him off curtly.

"But..." he stuttered, bewildered by this change in her. Her words were spoken in anger, but there was something else in her

expression he was unable to identify.

"There have been enough words between us, Mr. Darcy. I perfectly understand your feelings." Her bitterness was wounding.

"You do? Then why--"

"I am grateful to you, sir, for rescuing me, but have no wish to force any further actions that neither of us desires."

His first impulse was to angrily lash out at her, to protect himself and mask his vulnerability, but similar behavior at Hunsford had only resulted in more angry words from her in return and a lifetime's worth of regret on his part. He refused to make the same mistake again. If these were to be his last words to Elizabeth, he was determined he would make sure she did perfectly understand his feelings. Damn society's strictures.

"I have said and done many things I will regret for the rest of my life, especially concerning you, Miss Bennet. Please forgive my frankness, but I will not carry the additional regret of not having told you exactly how I feel." He looked off into the distance as he spoke, unable to look into her eyes for fear of what he might see in them. "If you perfectly understand my feelings, then

you know that I love you, my affections and wishes remain unchanged, or rather they continue to grow. From the beginning, I have been mesmerized by your laughter and wit, captivated by your grace and beauty, and awed by your intelligence and compassion. I cannot claim to know much of love. My parents had a marriage of convenience; nearly everyone I know has had the same. I never had any other expectations of my own situation but that it would be similar, that is, until I met you, and the whole world and my place in it were upturned. Your bright, lively spirit illuminated the dark corners of my existence, revealing its emptiness." He still could not bear to look at her other than an occasional furtive glance.

"Nothing could have prepared me for the disappointment and anguish I felt when you refused me. I tried to be angry with you, but my devotion rightfully turned my furor on myself. If you had not already earned my respect, you would have then for having the integrity to refuse me and the courage to reproach my behavior. You properly humbled me. Since then, all I have wanted to do is show you your reproofs were being attended

to." His voice began to falter. "Your letter gave me hope, and then with all that we have shared, I thought you had... that we had... I suppose I was wrong yet again."

She had been silent throughout his speech. When he finally found the courage to look upon her, he saw tears streaming down her face, her lips quivering, and worst of all was the anguish in her once sparkling eyes. And all because of him.

"It was never my intention to hurt you, Elizabeth," he choked out. "I must go." He turned quickly, needing to escape while he still had any semblance of control over his leaden limbs. He descended two steps before he felt the surprisingly firm grip of her hand on his upper arm. He slowly turned to face her, his eyes moist. Their faces were nearly level. Elizabeth reached up, gently held his face between her soft hands as she slowly closed her eyes, and pressed her warm lips upon his. Her kiss was whisper soft at first but grew in depth and passion as he responded instinctively. He moaned as his hesitant hands reached for her waist to draw her closer. She enchantingly melted into his embrace.

He held her possessively against his chest

while his frantically beating heart pleaded with his arms never to let her go. "Does this mean..." were all the words he could manage. Her nod was the only assent he needed at that moment. They stood quietly, clinging to each other for some time as the acute torrent of emotions subsided.

One cannot pass so quickly from the depths of despair to the euphoric peaks of exultation unscathed. Mr. Darcy's sense of reality had become fragile, and he needed to hold fast to her warm body to confirm she was his, and all was not a dream. Her slow, steady breaths soon regulated his own and secured him in their unity.

In spite of his overwhelming happiness, he was still troubled by her earlier anger. His head slanted down to rest gently against hers, and his hand lightly stroked her back while he bravely asked the question that weighed heavily upon him.

"Elizabeth, I am afraid to ask this, but I must. I need to understand what has happened. Why were you so angry with me?"

After a long pause, she finally spoke. "I overheard a private conversation you had with Mr. Bingley in his library." Her voice was

muffled as she spoke into his coat.

"Yes, and?" He encouraged her to continue.

"And you said you thought my injured ankle was a contrivance to..." Her voice faltered.

He tightened his arms around her as he began to comprehend what she had heard.

"We were speaking of Miss Bingley and something she had done that morning. It was not about you, my darling Elizabeth." He wanted nothing more than to continue to reassure and comfort her, but his own feelings were still so raw that he lacked the restraint that had so typically defined his character. He held her by the shoulders and gently pushed her away from him just enough to see her face. "Have you so little faith in me and in my constancy?" His insecurity was as audible in his voice as it was visible on his face.

She reached up to stroke his cheek.

"Fitzwilliam," she said his name softly for the first time. "I do trust you. It was me that I do not trust. These feelings of love are so new and profoundly overwhelming. I felt so vulnerable, having admitted to myself my feelings for you. It was my own doubt. I could not reasonably expect you to forgive me after I

lashed out and said those hurtful words, to expect that you could possibly still care."

If he had not been duly placated by hearing his name, then indeed the words that had followed ensured it. Her declaration of love was all he had hoped for.

His voice now confident, he reassured her. "I will always love you, Elizabeth."



Elizabeth's passionate kiss had opened a veritable Pandora's Box for Darcy. He had had difficulty enough keeping a reign on his libido when he was unsure of her feelings, but now that he was secure in her regard and had experienced a taste of her own passion, it was well nigh impossible.

It had only been one week since they had surprised everyone with the announcement of their engagement. When in public settings, Mr. Darcy's comportment was circumspect and proper with little evidence of the passion that lurked beneath his sedate demeanor, other than his intense stares and tendency to remain by Elizabeth's side. However, when away from

the prying eyes of others, his guard was immediately abandoned as he indulged his desire for his enthralling betrothed. The intimacy of their private, stolen moments had been steadily escalating to the point Mr. Darcy knew he was in danger of not being able to restrain himself. Elizabeth was so responsive and enthusiastic to his every touch he was left wondering what was between the covers of those infamous books in the highest reaches of Mr. Bennet's library. The subject of their wedding date had become a pressing issue for him, but he needed to proceed with caution and employ his considerable debating skills. He also could not disregard his continuing fear of something, anything, taking her from him again.

He had chosen to bring up the topic while they were out walking with Elizabeth's younger sisters, who shortly had wandered down a different path to visit Maria Lucas.

"I would like to discuss our wedding date, Elizabeth," he began just after they were left alone.

"Yes, I suppose that would be a good idea. There are numerous preparations to be made," she answered enthusiastically.

"I would like to marry soon. I can see no point in a long engagement."

"Really?" she grinned. "How is it that I am not very surprised by that? Very well, sir, what do you think about two month's time?" she offered generously.

"One week," he announced firmly.

"One week?" she laughed. "Surely you jest, Fitzwilliam! Why we could not possibly--"

"I will ride to London immediately. I will obtain the license, and settlement papers should be ready by the time I see my solicitor. And then I return before week's end with Georgiana and my cousin. We will marry the following day. Nothing could be simpler."

"Why such haste?"

"I could tell you it is because your mother is driving me close to madness with all of the wedding plans, or the social obligations of the engagement are overwhelming. Or I could tell you that you taunt my self-control every time we are together, and I would not be lying." He kissed her and used her passionate response to illustrate his point. "Elizabeth, you know we cannot continue like this," he said softly in her ear as he trailed his warm finger along the

neckline of her gown while enjoying the rise of her deep breath in reaction to his intimate touch.

"So, am I to understand you are marrying me because you can no longer control your passion?" she teased.

"I am marrying you because I love you beyond comprehension, and because you bring joy to my life and challenge me in ways I never thought possible. I am marrying you in one week because I no longer wish to control my passion, Elizabeth. There is a very big difference," he replied and emphasized his words with a deep kiss.

He had quickly learned his private declarations had a decidedly alluring effect on her. As he admired her lovely countenance, he was overwhelmed with the thought that she would soon be his.

"But the real truth of the matter is this: there are no guarantees in this life and having experienced the death of loved ones at an early age --" Elizabeth gasped, and he stroked her arm comfortingly as he continued.

"I do not mean to imply I think anything is going to happen to either of us. I just do not see any logical reason to delay what we both,

together, have decided that we desire. I do not want to waste any precious moment."

He waited a few moments. "What say you, Elizabeth? One week?" he questioned earnestly while lightly caressing her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

She smiled up at him through misty eyes. "One week is perfect."

After what seemed to him to be an all too brief affirmation of their concordant decision, they resumed their walk back to Longbourn, upon which she reminded him they still had the arduous task of convincing her father and mother.

"I do not think your father enjoys this commotion any more than I do. It is my belief the offer of lessening the duration of the engagement activities coupled with an open invitation to visit our quiet, well-stocked library at Pemberley will win your father's approval. Now about your mother, she does seem eager to please me," he grinned.

"Are you suggesting I leave this in your hands?"

"I convinced you, did I not?"

"Yes, and I am very distraught that you find

me so easy to persuade." Elizabeth looked at him peevishly. "If this is any indication of the outcome of our future debates, then I shall never have my way. This is a wretched beginning," she pouted.

"Come," he called to her as he took her hands in his and gently pulled her under the shelter of a large oak tree. He smiled mischievously as he bent and placed her delicate arms around his neck. "You may always have your way with me, my love."



As fate would have it, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy escorted his radiant bride, the new Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, out of Longbourn church one week later. If the sky was a clear crystal blue on that bright spring morning, it totally escaped his notice. He only saw the brilliance of Elizabeth's sparkling eyes. The warmth he felt was not born of the sun but from the nearness of her body as he kept her close to his side the entire morning.

If the church bells chimed harmoniously in tribute to their union, he did not hear them. If there was idle talk of his great fortune and his

fine carriage, he was oblivious to it. He heard only her delightful laughter. He smelled only her fragrance as he lovingly leaned close to whisper in her ear. He was only aware of his rapturous wife and the keeping of his abiding promise. His mind was most agreeably engaged with thoughts of the many ways he would show her how very much he loved her.

10. Superior Execution

Mr. Darcy stood spellbound by the sight of Elizabeth, lit only by the red and amber glow of the hearth. The radiant light embraced the curves of her figure visible through the thin veneer of her silky white gown. Jealous of the flame's intimacy with the body he alone should covet, he moved close to her so only their warm, heavy breaths filled the distance between them. Her eyes sparkled like jewels, enticing him to claim the treasure that she offered. He now measured his wealth in the bounty of her body and soul, and his coffers overflowed.

Her happiness was the key to his own and never more particularly so than on this their wedding night. In his haste to rejoin her, he had taken a moment to consider how a new wife might wish to view her husband at such a time. He realized he had no idea how he should dress to please her.

He had removed his coat, groomed, and loosened his cravat. Eventually, he would discover her surprising preference for him with a shadow of a beard, tousled hair, and

shirtless, but presently he was reassured of her pleasure when she sighed his name against his bare throat and quivered as he stroked her back. With a sudden need to see her eyes, he lifted her chin. Would that she always look at him so. From the beginning, he had reacted powerfully to her, and now her alluring smile flared his passion. He drew his thumb across the soft bow of her lip before he gently pressed his own moist lips upon hers. As her lips parted under pressure, he retraced the path of his thumb with his tongue. Her soft moan provoked his urges, and his kisses became more demanding, as he let his need for her be known. Pulling her tightly to him, he pressed his hips firmly against hers. Terms of endearment fell lovingly from his lips as he continued his adoration.

Elizabeth found security in his sheltering arms, and her fears slowly dissolved in his affection. Darcy was a man of few words, but those he spoke to her were honest and heartfelt. She knew of no poet's words as passionate and his were for her, and her alone. Any feelings and desires left unspoken, he more than eloquently demonstrated to her through his ardent actions. Giving in to her

own desires, she covered his handsome face with kisses, her fervent lips exploring his contours, while her hands caressed the richness of his dark wavy hair. Her finger lightly traced the new scar on his forehead. He had reassured her that he would never be sorry for it because the man with the scar was the better man and the one with whom she had fallen in love. She kissed the scar reverently and resumed her devotion to his proud, smiling lips.

In the privacy of their union, inhibitions were finally dropped. The layers between them slowly fell away, as inquisitive hands and eager eyes sought new discoveries. He swept her up into his arms, and she nestled her head against his bare chest. A mantle of silky curls bathed his shoulder in warmth as he carried her to the lush finery of the bed.

His eyes traveled over her splendid form, perusing every peak and valley. She shivered and flushed under the intensity of his gaze. Mindful of her modesty, he covered her with his body and coaxed her with tender kisses across her face and down her neck. Feeling her hesitancy ebb, he could not resist moving lower to the rounded curves of her breasts. As

he kissed a trail of circles over her smooth, creamy skin, he teased her with occasional playful nips until her clasp on his hair tightened, and he indulged her silent plea.

His open mouth drifted back up to her throat, coming to rest over the sensitive spot where her blood pulsated feverishly just beneath the surface. Her soft moans of pleasure drove him to more determined action. He nipped, sucked, and gently bit as she writhed beneath him. He raised his head to admire the evidence of his ardor, the small red imprint of his mouth that marked his claim upon her sumptuous body.

The fire warmed the room, but Elizabeth was only aware of the tingling heat her new husband created as he touched each new area, awakening dormant sensations. She was quickly learning that stripped of societal constraints and the weight of responsibility, Mr. Darcy was a spontaneous and enthusiastic lover. He seemed to have a myriad of exploring hands, countless probing tongues, and endless searching lips intent on finding all of her secrets, even secrets she had not known she held. The heavyweight of his body at once pressed her down and lifted from her cries for

more - though she knew not what she craved. She was shaken by the force of her ravenous hunger for him.

Her mind and body were equally engaged in their intimate endeavors, and she yearned to explore more of his inspiring figure. She was the sculptor hovering over him, and his body was the masterpiece magically forming under her hands as she traversed every plane. Images she had sketched in her mind were now completed as she admired him wholly. Her articulate fingers traced the patterns of the thick veins in his arms and kneaded his well-defined muscles. As her hands sculpted his torso, the potency of his physique enthralled her. He was beautiful - contrasting shades of dark against light, strength versus tenderness. Sweeping her hands lower, she daringly blazed a new path along the taut ridges of his abdomen. His muscles contracted reflexively to her touch, and she marveled at her mastery of this art, feeling the shape of him change with her persistent stroking. Emboldened by her success and his aroused response, she was inspired to place her mouth where her hands had been.

Darcy could no longer remain passive.

Frantically, he pulled her back to him, capturing her mouth with a searing kiss. Her long flowing hair cascaded over him, binding him to her just as tightly and securely as corded ropes. He was her willing captive, and there was no ransom for his wildly beating heart that now belonged to her.

Breathless and reeling from his attentive lovemaking, surging pleasure dueled with her continuing ache, making her increasingly impatient. As if he sensed her frustration, he moved to press his weight more fully upon her. His caressing hand relieved some of her tension, but only briefly, as a new fire was sparked, burning hot and deep within her.

Their intimate dance continued, building to a crescendo. The flickering firelight cast a single silhouette upon the wall, the disparity of their forms was lost as they melded into one. He swallowed her cries as he filled her, gently at first, stroking and enticing her sleeping synapses to awaken to his insistent movement. Maidenly uncertainties were forgotten in the shadow of love's pleasures.

His passion raged beyond his control. He was falling toward ecstasy with all sensation converging and pooling as he was surrounded

by all that was her. He buried his face in the pillow of her hair that filtered the savagery of his cry, and she clutched his shuddering body to her.

"I am yours," she whispered softly into his ear. Her caressing, warm breath flowed through him, leaving him weightless and contented in her arms.

His love was now written on her body, carved and etched in an intricate pattern made beautiful by lasting pureness. A covenant composed of abiding passion, uniting her to him. The quintessential reality that she returned his love in equal measure was more than simply good fate - it was divine.

The End

